

Elections should be about people, not parties

By Marty Knollenberg

Straight ticket voting is the practice of automatically voting for all the nominees of a political party by making a single choice on the ballot.

Originally a tool of party bosses and political machines, straight ticket voting was an easy and convenient way for the parties to move their people through the polls, certain that they had voted for all the party-nominated candidates on the ballot.

Most Americans take for granted that our voting system is based on privacy and standardized, government-issued ballots. In fact, these reforms didn't fully occur until 1892.

Prior to 1892, local political parties provided ballots to voters with their party's candidates already selected. Ballots were cast in public, under the watchful eyes of party leaders.

While it was possible for a voter to cast a split-ticket ballot, the threat of retribution from party leaders discouraged the practice. For much of American history, political party imposed straight ticket voting has been the norm.

It wasn't until the Civil Rights Era that reformers severed the control parties had over the election process, with the rise of open primaries. The elimination of straight ticket voting is an extension of those reforms.

Since the 1960s, forty states have eliminated straight ticket voting. Michigan is one of only 10 states that have retained this party control tool leftover from the eras of political bosses like Boss Tweed and "Nucky" Johnson.

A 2012 Gallup Poll found that 42 percent of Americans identified themselves as Independent, not Republican or Democratic. And Michigan voters have long been known for ticket splitting—voting for some Republican candidates and some Democratic candidates; this trend is likely to continue into the future.

The national, bipartisan trend is toward eliminating straight ticket voting. Democratic leaning states like New York no longer have it, nor do Republican leaning states like Georgia.

Some supporters of the status quo claim eliminating straight ticket voting reduces voter choice and results in longer lines at polling locations.

Neither of these claims are true.

A person who wants to vote a straight ticket still has the option to vote for all nominated candidates of a preferred party.

A determined partisan choosing the Republican or Democratic candidate at each section of the ballot shouldn't take more than 30 seconds of additional time in the polling booth.

And, in this instance, is the convenience of speed really the highest societal good, as straight ticket supporters assert?

This is not an issue of fast food drive-thru, this is an issue of choosing the men and women who lead our local, state and federal governments. The decisions they make have very real consequences in our daily lives.

Shouldn't we encourage citizens, as part of our collective civic duty, to fully engage in the selection of our leaders by pausing, making a thoughtful decision, and voting for an individual based on his or her merits, and not based solely on party affiliation?

Reformers have done away with political machines and party bosses. We should, likewise, do away with their method of electing candidates and eliminate straight ticket voting.

Marty Knollenberg is the state Senator for the 13th District